A Child's Story of American Literature

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of course "Rip Van Winkle," which tells of the ne'er do well Rip, journeying up into the mountains and finding Henrik Hudson and his crew playing nine pins, and then going to sleep for twenty years, and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," the story of the schoolmaster, Ichabod Crane, who loved the country flirt, Katrina Van Tassel, and who was pursued on Hallowe'en night by the terrible "Headless Horseman." If Washington Irving had written no other stories than these he would still be a great man in American literature.

From England Washington Irving went to live in Paris for a time and while there made the acquaintance of John Howard Payne, the author of "Home, Sweet Home," and once the two planned to take French plays and make them over for the English and American stage. But very little if anything came of that. By and by Irving wrote "Bracebridge Hall," which described English country life, and "The Tales of a Traveler"; and then, having made up his mind that he wanted to write a "Life of Columbus," he went to Spain to be in the land whence the great discoverer sailed for the New World, and there, for many wonderful months, he lived within the palace of the Alhambra, in Granada, which had been the last stronghold of the Moors in Europe, that once upon a time they had come so near to conquering. In the Alhambra Irving finished his "Columbus" and wrote his "Conquest of Granada" and his "Tales of the Alhambra." Then two years more in London, and in 1831 he sailed for home.

When, seventeen years before, he had left New York, he had been a little great man; now he was a big great man. Before he departed from England the medal of the Royal Society of Literature had been given to him, and those who witnessed the presentation shouted "Diedrich Knickerbocker!" "Ichabod Crane!" "Rip Van Winkle!" You may be sure his own fellow countrymen were not going to be behind the English in doing him honor. There was a big public dinner for him in the City Hotel, which was at Thames street and Broadway, near Trinity Church, and was then the finest hostelry in New York.

In his speech at that dinner he told of the many amazing changes he had found in the city of his birth. If the boys and girls who know New York to-day could see that town of 1831 they would probably laugh. But to Irving it was a wonder city. When he had sailed away from New York in 1815 what is now Brooklyn Heights had been nothing but a green forest on a hill. The sights that met his eyes moved him to say: "How shall I describe my emotions when our city rose to sight, seated in the midst of its watery domain, stretching away to a vast extent —when I beheld a glorious sunshine lighting up the skies and domes, some familiar to memory, others new and unknown, and beaming upon a forest of masts of every nation, extending as far as the eye could reach! I have gazed with admiration upon many a fair city and stately harbor, but my admiration was cold and ineffectual, for I was a stranger, and had no property in the soil. Here, however, my heart thrilled with pride and joy as I admired—I had a birthright in the brilliant scene before me: 'This was my own, my native land.'"

American Journeys; Astoria, Sunnyside.

One of Washington Irving's first journeys after his return home was to the scenes of "Rip Van Winkle," the tale that, written twelve years before, had made the Catskill Mountains famous throughout England and America. Of course, the descriptions had all been drawn from his imagination, but on the trip fellow travelers, not knowing who he was, pointed out to him the exact spots where Rip's home stood, and where he threw himself down for his twenty years sleep. When he wrote to his brother Peter telling his adventures, Peter replied: "I have little doubt but some curious travelers will yet find the bones of Rip's dog."

After the Catskills there came another and much longer journey, to the far West, which was then held by the Indians. As a result of this journey he wrote his "Tour of the Prairies" and his "Astoria," the latter being an account of the fur trading settlement of the Astor family in Oregon. Back again in New York he went for a time to live as a guest in the house of John Jacob Astor, which overlooked the East River in that part of the city which was long known as Astoria. But although he had no boys or girls of his own his heart yearned for a home of his own, and he bought Sunnyside, on the banks of the Hudson, near Tarrytown. And there, about Uncle Washington, gathered the nephews and nieces, especially the nieces. Perhaps they were troublesome children at times. But he never complained, and he called Sunnyside "the best house to which an old bachelor ever came"; where he had "but to walk in, hang up his hat, kiss his nieces, and take his seat in his elbow chair for the remainder of his life."

The Later Years.

Although in those days one usually traveled from New York to Tarrytown by boat on the Hudson River, and it was no journey of three-quarters of an hour, you may be sure the city tried to keep in touch with its best beloved man of letters, and never neglected a chance to do him honor. From time to time, especially in the winter, he came down from his country home to enjoy the theater, of which he was very fond, usually staying at the home of a nephew, who lived either in a house at the corner of Irving place and Eighteenth street, or in the house next door. He was asked to become Mayor of the city and was made the first president of the Astor Library. When Charles Dickens came over to make us his first visit, there was of course a big dinner for him, and Washington Irving naturally had to take the chair. To tell the truth he was not the best speech maker in the world. In greeting the English novelist he got as far as "Charles Dickens, the guest of the nation," and then sat down. "There," he said, "I told you I should break down, and I've done it." Everybody laughed and loved him the more.

In doing Washington Irving honor the nation did not want to fall behind the city of New York, so Daniel Webster, who was Secretary of State under President Polk, asked him to become our Minister to Spain. There were no American Ambassadors in those days. Had there been, be sure that Washington Irving would have been asked to become an Ambassador. At any rate he accepted, and four more of his years were spent in Europe. But this time his heart was not there. He wanted to be just Uncle Washington, sitting among his nephews and nieces, especially, as has been said, nieces, and writing his books in the library at Sunnyside, with the noble Hudson meeting his eyes as he looked out of the window.

Then the last years, the pretty last years, when the tide of life was ebbing gently out. They were busy years. He wrote "Wolfert's Roost," and his "Life of Goldsmith," and his "Life of Washington." Great people from all the world visiting New York went to see him at Sunnyside as one makes a pilgrimage to a shrine. He was outwardly happy and always kind. But perhaps there were times, when he was all alone in his library, that he took out that package with the lock of hair and the miniature, and thought of the years long gone and whispered the name "Matilda."

Who can say?

Then the day came, it was November 28, 1859, when the news reached the city that Washington Irving was dead at seventy-six years of age. There were sad faces in the streets, and the flags on buildings and on ships in the harbor and along the river fronts were pulled down to half mast, and the Mayor and Council recognized the event as a public grief. It was as if a President or a great soldier had died. Thus New York paid last tribute to its Uncle Washington Irving.